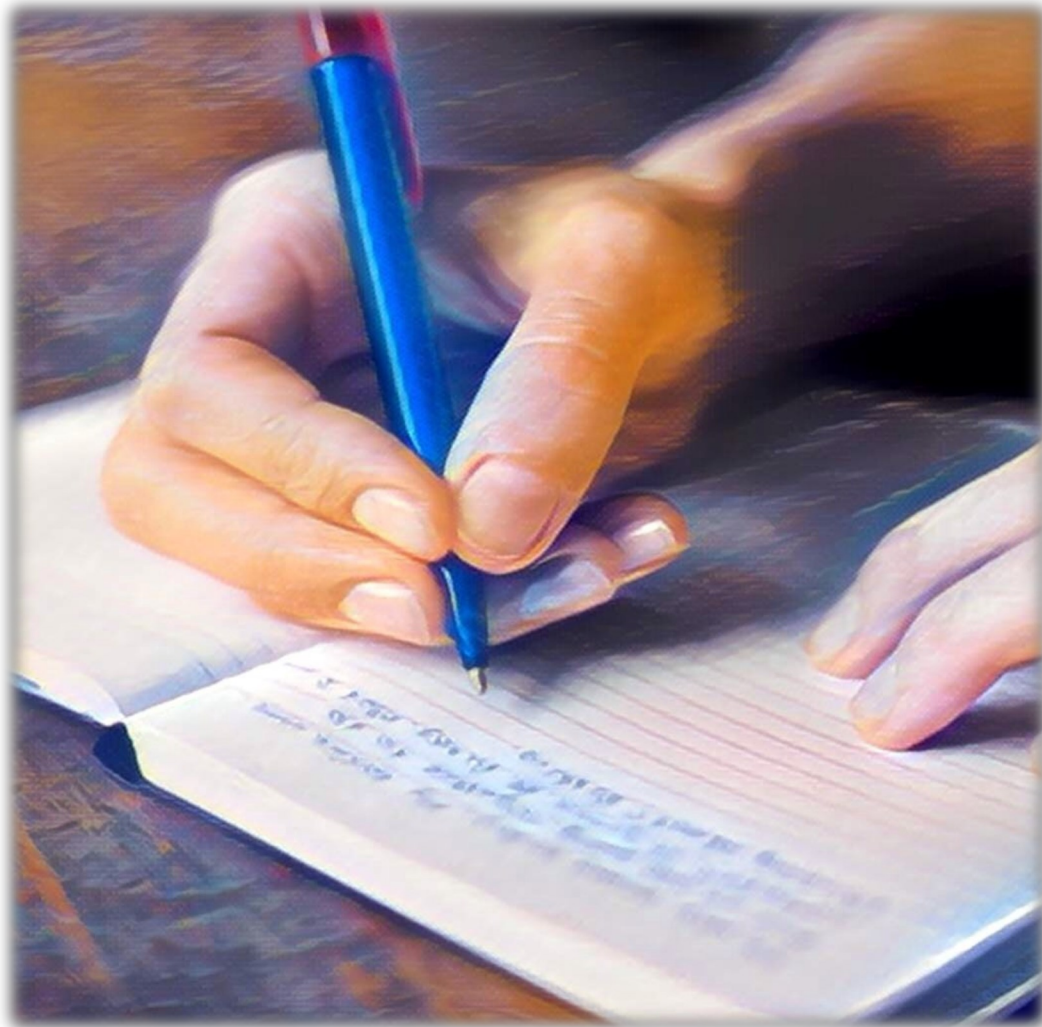


2017

Healing Voices Literary Contest

Compassion

What Does Compassion Mean to You?



A Program of the Arts & Health Partnership



**Atlantic
Health System**



MONTCLAIR STATE
UNIVERSITY

Third Place (tie)

Closing Time

Kathy Curto

Montclair State University

I work at the car wash every day except Sunday. Get in at 8:00, leave at 5:30. I let the last car go through at 5:00 because by the time I count my cash box and record the day's numbers it's about 5:15 which leaves me the last fifteen minutes to open the safe, put the money in, double check the master water valve and triple check the breakers before locking up.

But yesterday, a lady pulled up in an old, rattling Buick at 5:10. I was counting the singles and when I looked her way, she rolled down her window.

"Sorry, we're closed," I yelled through the opening between the glass door and little office space that is my grotto when we are slow and nobody wants shiny cars. It's where I read and wonder what heaven looks like.

She yelled back. "Please, Sugar, my girl needs a cleaning real bad."

I shoved the stack of singles in my pocket and walked toward her and her Buick. The hood was speckled with residue of rust and bird shit. Her stubby, dry fingers flew across the dusty, maroon dashboard. Coffee-stained letters and what looked to be unopened bills fell to the floor of the passenger's side.

I leaned into her open window to say, *I started closing out my cash box already, ma'am-sorry* but then I smelled a weird combination of salami and rubbing alcohol. My eyes moved from her fingers to her hair which was black and greasy, but some was gone. Portions of her scalp showed.

"Yeah, I guess she kinda does," I said, and turned away to look at the main operating panel that held the buttons for all the washes and waxes and shine options. I looked back at the random hairless spots on her head.

"Please, Sugar," she pleaded "I got a five here somewhere." She turned away and opened the glove compartment. Ketchup packets and what looked like an old black and white photograph of a man in a soldier's uniform fell to the floor, landing on top of the letters and bills.

"Why don't you go ahead and take your foot off the brake and put it in neutral, ma'am. I got this one today."

I looked one more time at the soldier boy on the floor.

Then I pushed hard on the blue button labeled "The Works" and watched her and her girl fade into the last wash of the day.